# Drifting Apart or Sticking Together?

*An analysis of coalition partners' behavior in 11 Western European countries*

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**Abstract**

Do political parties adapt their electoral platform in response to their (former) coalition partners? Most empirical studies of party platform change theorize and demonstrate that vote-seeking strategies motivate parties' platform changes, but discount post-election coalition bargaining. Many parties, however, compete in multiparty systems and thus need to form coalition governments. Due to the complexity of multiparty coalition politics, parties cannot calculate their optimal electoral fortune. They, therefore, use simple heuristics to determine their next electoral strategy (i.e. converge or diverge from their current coalition partner). We hypothesize and demonstrate that if coalition parties receive cues that the coalition works, they propose similar platforms in next elections, but diverge when the prospects deteriorate. We test our hypotheses with an innovative measure of party platform change through pooled times-series cross sectional analyses of 3766 platform changes in 11 European democracies using new opinion poll data and several existing data sets.

**Key words**

*Political parties' strategies; opposition-incumbency dynamics; political decision-making*

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Of all governments in Western Europe between 1945 and 1999 64% have been coalition governments and 23% have been one-party minority governments dependent on support parties in parliament (Mitchell and Nyblade 2008). Due to electoral fractionalization countries that were accustomed to one-party majority governments have recently experienced coalition government (United Kingdom) or will most likelyexperience it soon (Spain). The Norwegian, Swedish and to a lesser extent Danish Social Democrats traditionally ruled alone, but are now forced to form coalitions with radical left, green, and center parties. Thus, coalition government is becoming the norm for most political parties in most West European democracies.

Coalition governments make understanding politics more complex for voters, because it becomes more difficult to distinguish individual party positions of parties that form a coalition government. In fact, voters see parties in coalition cabinets as more ideologically similar (Fortunato & Stevenson, 2012). To avoid negative consequences of voters discounting their position, government parties perform better in elections if they present a more extreme platform (Bawn & Somer-Topcu, 2012). At the same time policy-seeking parties that share responsibility for the policies of a coalition government, have an incentive to converge to similar policy positions (Adams, Ezrow, Merrill, & Somer-Topcu, 2012). Given these different theoretical predictions, we ask: do parties in coalition governments drift apart or stick together at the next election?

We propose several hypotheses on how the necessity for post-election coalition formation affects the election platforms of coalition partners. What underlies our hypotheses, is the assumption that parties cannot compute an optimal electoral strategy. Maximizing vote share will not help to achieve office, because electoral performance is by no means a guarantee

for participation in a coalition government (Mattila & Raunio, 2004). Such a strategy could even upset potential coalition parties. For that reason, parties that frequently switch between opposition and government, are less likely to exploit issues (so-called wedge issues) that are highly salient for the electorate, but could split (potential) coalition parties (Hobolt & de Vries, 2015; van de Wardt, de Vries, & Hobolt, 2014). Second, adding to the complexity of choosing an electoral strategy, is the fact that the party leader needs to retain the support of the intra-party's selectorate, which is unlikely to support party shifts away from the party's core ideology. In this complex decision-making environment, it is more likely that parties use simple rules-of-thumb to make decisions about their electoral platform (Bendor, Diermeier, Siegel, & Ting, 2011; Laver & Sergenti, 2012). In particular, we hypothesize that government parties converge, if they know that the coalition works. Thus, if government parties have a long history of co-governing (H2), receive information from the polls that they are popular (H3), and when coalitions do not experience internal conflicts (H4), we hypothesize that they stick together. Bad polls, coalition in-fighting and low trust due to an absence of a shared history make government parties drift apart.

Because we want to explain divergence or convergence between two parties, we develop a new measure of election platform change (the dependent variable): *the change in issue distance between a dyad of parties*. For each party dyad, we calculate the distance between these parties on 19 issue categories. These 19 issues consists of positional issues (e.g., positive references to multiculturalism versus negative references to multiculturalism) and valence issues (e.g., mentions of environmental issues) and are based on a re-categorization of the Manifesto Project scheme (Schumacher, van de Wardt, Vis, & Klitgaard, 2015). Our

dependent variable and unit of analysis (i.e., the unique party dyads per national election) differ markedly from the practice in the empirical party shifts literature that focuses on left-right party shifts with parties as units of analysis. We deviate from this standard for two reasons: (1) our hypotheses concern the degree to which parties are alike or not alike, which is a relation between two parties, not a characteristic of a single party. (2) We analyze issue distance rather than the distance between party's left-right positions because a) issue competition has become more important (Green-Pedersen, 2007); and b) because the parties we analyze are engaged in political competition on multiple dimensions (Laver & Benoit, 2006).

We have calculated issue distance for 3,766 dyads of parties in 11 countries in the period 1950-2014.[2] We use times-series cross-sectional analyses clustered on party dyads to account for the interdependence of the data. We demonstrate that on average, party dyads increase their issue distance. Being more familiar with your coalition partner and being popular, makes a party pair more likely to decrease their issue distance, whereas terminating the coalition due to conflict makes coalition partners more likely to increase their issue distance.

This paper unfolds as follow. First, a theory section situates the research question and the study's hypotheses within the framework of party platform change and coalition formation research. Thereafter details of the research design and the research strategy are described. Next, the results are discussed and the remaining section draws a conclusion.

[2] The country selection (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden) is based on whether countries have a tradition of coalition governments and the time period is determined by data availability.

**Coalition formation and election platform shifts**

To predict the outcomes of post-election coalition bargaining, many have constructed formal models with political parties seeking to maximize policy and office pay-offs (for overviews, see Humphreys, 2008; Laver, 1998). Similar models have been applied to predict the direction of parties' position shift prior to the election (for an overviews see Adams 2012). We seek to combine the two strands of literature: do parties shift their position prior to the election with the post-election coalition bargaining process in mind?

We choose to answer this question empirically, instead of developing a formal model. We do so, because the path to office is riddled with uncertainty about the best strategy to obtain this goal. Parties have to predict the positions rival parties will take, the responses of voters to these positions, the most likely coalitions to emerge from the coalitions and subsequently calculate which position maximizes whatever goal (policy or office) they seek to maximize. Especially, the choice of a position (or set of positions) that maximizes entry into coalition formation is difficult. To choose a vote-maximizing position will simply not work in a multi-party context. Mattila and Raunio (2004), demonstrate in their analysis of 15 West European countries that winning seats poorly predicts participation into government. The largest party often ends up in government, but for smaller parties, winning seats does not necessarily help them into office. Even worse, in Austria, Germany, Spain and Italy, Mattila and Raunio (2004) find evidence that losing seats increases the probability of a party to join government. Hence, vote- and office-seeking behavior does not always coincide. The Dutch Labour Party is one of many examples of parties that learned this painful lesson. The party's shift towards the left in the 1970's satisfied party activists and brought massive gains in

electoral support. Yet after a stint in government (1972-1977) the Christian-Democrats refused cooperation with Labour favoring instead coalitions with the Dutch Liberals. The Labour Party stayed in opposition for 11 years, until it slowly found its way back to the center which led to vote loss in the 1989 and 1994 elections but it joined a government coalition on both occasions (Marx & Schumacher, 2013; van Praag, 1994; Wolinetz, 1993).[3]

Such dynamics are partly driven by what Riker (1962) called the 'size principle'. Office-seeking parties seek to maximize the income and rents associated with political office and thus choose the smallest possible coalition partner, so that they have to redistribute as few resources as necessary. Thus, parties unlikely to become the largest party have to engage in a difficult balancing act: they need to become small enough to be the smallest coalition partner, but large enough to be able to form a majority coalition with a larger party.

Rather than assuming that parties calculate optimal responses to their specific situations, we follow recent theoretical contributions that propose that parties follow simple decision-making rules. Laver and Sergenti (2012), for example, propose the *HUNTER rule*: parties move in the same direction in a two-dimensional space if they gained votes in the last election, and the move in the opposite direction if they lost votes in the last election (Fowler & Laver, 2008; Laver, 2005; for an example with coalition formation see Lehrer & Schumacher, 2015). Similarly, Bendor and co-authors (2011) propose that parties stick to their strategy if it worked in the last election, and switch to another strategy if it did not work. We propose that parties take post-election coalition bargaining into account when deciding on their electoral

[3] The period 1977-1989 was interrupted by a one-year spell in government with the Christian Democrats (1981). This coalition rather quickly broke down, leading to new elections in 1982.

platform in a similar way. They stick to what they have if they receive cues that it works, and they switch to a new strategy if it does not work.

We assume that parties plant the seeds of future coalitions in their election manifestos, that is: they de-emphasize those issues that are not critical to them but which are problematic for their potential coalition partner. Indeed, several empirical studies demonstrate the importance of ideological similarity between coalition partners. Warwick (1996) reports that the more ideological distance between a party and the *formateur* party, the less likely the party is to join the government coalition. Martin and Stevenson (2001) report that ideological divisions reduce the likelihood of a coalition to form (also see Martin and Stevenson 2010). In sum, ideological similarity is an important factor in coalition formation and thus it is likely that parties consider their similarity to parties they wish to govern with.

In the next sections, we will theorize that intra-cabinet conflict, opinion polls and a shared history are cues that parties use to evaluate whether to drift apart or stick together with their coalition partner. But, first we will use the current literature on election platform shifts to produce two more general hypotheses.

**Do coalition partners converge or diverge?**

The empirical literature explaining party platform shifts primarily analyzes the effect of public opinion shifts, opinion leader shifts, rival party shifts, party voter shifts, and electoral performance (Adams & Ezrow, 2009; Adams, Haupt, & Stoll, 2008; Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009; Budge, Ezrow, & McDonald, 2010; Budge, 1994; Harmel & Janda, 1994; Schumacher, de Vries, & Vis, 2013). A recent paper analyzes the effect of governing on election platform change

and reports that governing parties on average change more than opposition parties (Schumacher et al., 2015). It is unclear, however, whether this change translates into proposing a more similar platform as a governing party's coalition partner or becoming less alike. At least in the perspective of voters, coalition parties are harder to distinguish. In their analysis of 54 electoral surveys in 18 European countries Fortunato and Stevenson (2012) report that voters perceive parties in a coalition cabinet as more ideologically similar. Moreover, Clark (2009) reports that events such as a corruption scandal not only negatively impact on voter's evaluation of the party's valence attributes and its electoral performance, but this also spreads to the coalition partners of that party. These voters' perceptions (similar perceptions of coalition parties in terms of of ideological position and valence attributes of coalition parties) have consequences for parties' electoral strategies.This leads us two draw two opposite conclusions regarding the consequences for parties' platform positioning.

First, because voters perceive coalition parties identical in terms of valence, the more radical party in the coalition is at an electoral disadvantage compared to the more moderate party in the coalition. For that reason, Adams and co-authors (Adams et al., 2012; Adams & Merrill III, 2009) predict that the more radical party shifts to the center, and thus becomes more like its moderate coalition partner (H1a).

Second, because coalition partners become more alike, it is even more difficult for voters to distinguish them, which helps opposition parties eat into the electoral support of the government parties. In fact, government parties perform better electorally if they radicalize after governing (Bawn & Somer-Topcu, 2012). One can also argue that as a team of parties, a coalition is better able to catch a larger part of the electorate if it spreads out over the

ideological dimensions on which parties are competing. This suggests that coalition partners become less alike (H1b). Leading to the following hypotheses:

**H1a**: *Party dyads in a coalition government decrease their issue distance at the next election.*

**H1b**: *Party dyads in a coalition government increase their issue distance at the next election.*

If numerically possible, parties seem to have a preference to continue existing coalition governments after fresh elections - the so-called "incumbency advantage" (Martin & Stevenson, 2001, 2010). When coalition partners value ideological proximity, they should propose ideologically similar platforms when contesting elections. Thus, if anything, coalition parties are likely to become more similar as to strengthen their ties. Also, because they need to defend the same government policies, we argue that they are more likely to drift to each other than to drift apart (H1a).

**The conditionality of coalition partners' convergence or divergence**

In-between elections, government parties receive cues about their future electoral performance. We now discuss three variables that potentially serve as cues as to whether the current coalition is satisfactory and should be repeated or not.

First, parties that have worked together may share mutual trust and understanding which facilitates future cooperation (Browne & Franklin, 1973; Franklin & Mackie, 1983, 1992; Martin & Stevenson, 2010). Or parties continue cooperation in a coalition government because striking new bargains with other parties is more costly (Martin & Stevenson, 2010; Warwick, 1996) or risky. If parties favor the continuation of – familiar or cheap – coalition government

arrangements and they care about the ideological similarity of a coalition, one might expect that parties in a coalition will not choose to become ideologically diverse. Doing so would alienate the coalition partners and risk reducing the probability of continuing the government coalition. Thus, we hypothesize:

**H2***: The longer a party dyad has been in government, the more it decreases its issue distance at the next election.*

Second, if governments are unpopular on average (i.e. the cost of governing) (Nannestad & Paldam, 2002; Powell & Whitten, 1993), there is also much variation in how (un)popular a government is. Opinion polls tell government parties much about their future electoral prospects, and by consequence, the prospect of forming the same coalition again. On a regular or sometimes even on a daily basis, polling agencies report voters' preferences for the political parties in the system. By indicating that the government will either lose seats or win seats in the next election, polls could incentivize parties to reconsider their election platform. When a government party is confronted with losing its position, they have incentives to dissociate themselves from the current issues on the political agenda and emphasize new or previously ignored issues in order to improve their electoral fortunes. One way in which a party can employ this strategy is to adopt a polarizing position on that issue (Hobolt & de Vries, 2011). This logic would suggest that unpopular parties in government choose a new strategy; in other words, they distinguish their platform from their current partner instead of moving towards their current partner. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**H3**: *The more popular a government, the more party dyads in government will decrease their issue distance.*

While government parties try to 'ride the popularity wave' and propose similar platforms to deduce the cost of post-electoral bargaining, government parties are only expected to do so when they rely on their partner to continue future cooperation. Sharman (2007) argues that analyzing actors' past behavior, specifically the consequences of defecting from prior cooperation, helps scholars understand the actors' likely future behavior. Tavits (2008) builds upon this logic and demonstrates that parties are unlikely to team up again in a coalition government if their coalition broke down due to conflict. Coalition in-fighting reduces mutual trust between current coalition partners and increases the bargaining costs of future coalition agreements. Because government parties punish their coalition partners for defecting from cooperation in the coalition (Tavits, 2008), they are even more likely to dissociate themselves from their former partners if they are popular when contesting new elections. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**H4**: *Popular party dyads in government are more likely to increase their distance if the coalition terminated due to a conflict.*

Table 1 summarizes the theory section, outlining the dependent variable (issue distance change), independent variables, hypotheses, and the coefficients' predicted signs.

**Table 1. Definitions and Hypotheses**

| **Definitions** |
|---|
| Pr(P) = probability of issue distance change of coalition partners |
| X1 (cabinet): In government (1) or in opposition (0) prior to election |
| X2 (familiarity): history of being in government together |
| X3 (popularity): relative popularity of party pair |
| X4 (termination cause): 0 not in cabinet, 1 end of electoral term, 2 conflict, 3 voluntary early elections |

| Hypotheses | | Predictions |
|---|---|---|
| *H1a* | Pr(P) = $\beta_1 X_1$ + controls | $\beta_1$<0 |
| *H1b* | | $\beta_1$>0 |
| *H2* | Pr(P) = $\beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_1 * X_2$ + controls | $\beta_3$<0 for higher $X_2$ |
| *H3* | Pr(P) = $\beta_1 X_1 + \beta_4 X_3 + \beta_5 X_1 * X_3$ + controls | $\beta_5$<0 for higher $X_3$ |
| *H4* | Pr(P) = $\beta_2 X_2 + \beta_6 X_4 + \beta_7 X_2 * X_4$ controls | $\beta_7$>0 for $X_4$= 2 |

**Data & Operationalization**

Our sample consists of countries with a tradition of coalition governments. Based on data availability, this gives us a sample of 11 European countries[4] from 1950 till 2014 with 166 unique country-election waves and 636 party dyads.[5] We included all party platforms that are present in the Manifesto Project Dataset (Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, Budge, & McDonald, 2006; Volkens et al., 2014) in at least two subsequent elections.[6] Our dependent variable, which we call $\Delta\ Issue\ Distance$, measures the difference in distance between the electoral platform of two parties over time:

$$\Delta\ Issue\ Distance = \sum |P_{i,k,t} - P_{j,k,t}| - \sum |P_{i,k,t-1} - P_{j,k,t-1}|$$

We take the sum of the absolute distances between the position of party $i$ on issue $k$ at time $t$ ($P_{i,k,t}$) and the position of party $j$ on issue $k$ at time $t$ ($P_{j,k,t}$). We create 19 issue categories from the Manifesto Project Data using a re-categorization scheme that includes positional issues such as the party's position on the economy and attentional issues or valence

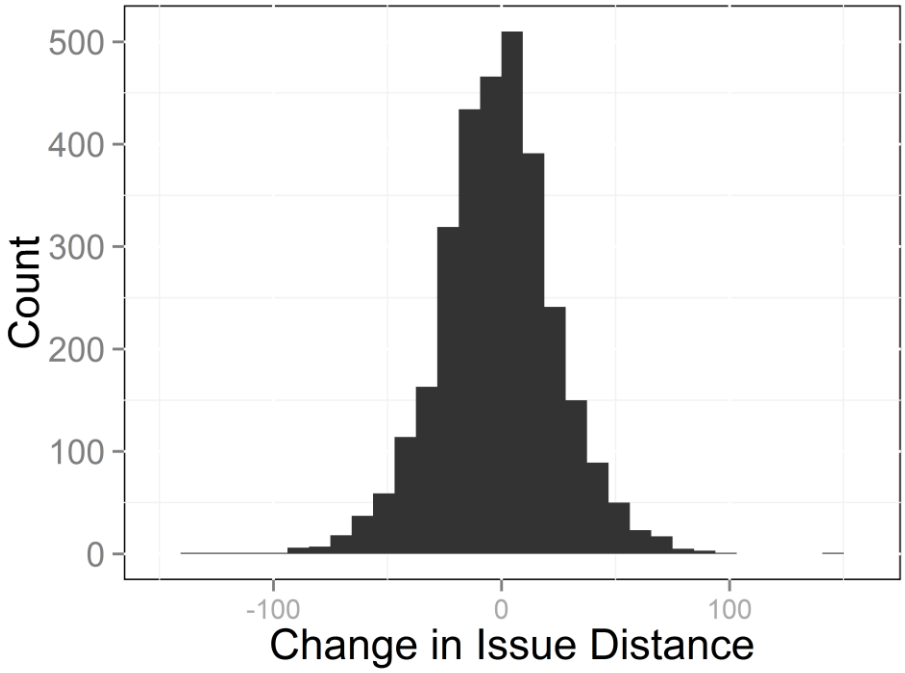
[4] These countries are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden.

[5] Appendix A gives an overview of the country-election waves that are in the data.

[6] It is becoming customary in the party responsiveness literature to replicate findings using dependent variables constructed also from expert surveys and voter surveys of party positions. We do not do this here because expert surveys and voter surveys of party positions are strongly influenced by what parties do in government. Whether parties choose to associate or dissociate with their coalition partners is most likely to be expressed in their election manifesto.

issues such as the party's attention to the environment (Schumacher et al., 2015).[7] To illustrate the measure Figure 1 shows the distribution of change in issue distance in our data and Table 2 displays issue position and issue attention of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) and the Dutch Democratic Socialists '70 (DS70) at the 1972 and 1977 elections on the 19 re-categorized issues. For each issue, we calculate the distance between the pair PvdA-DS70. Our dependent variable is the sum of change in distance of the issues, which in this example is -2.0 (approximately the average change in issue distance in our data, which is -2.3). This means that at the 1977 elections the issue distance between PvdA and DS70 increased compared to the 1977 elections. In other words, the platforms of these two parties became less alike.

**Figure 1. Histogram of Change in Issue Distance**




[7] Appendix B gives an overview of which CMP categories belong to which issue

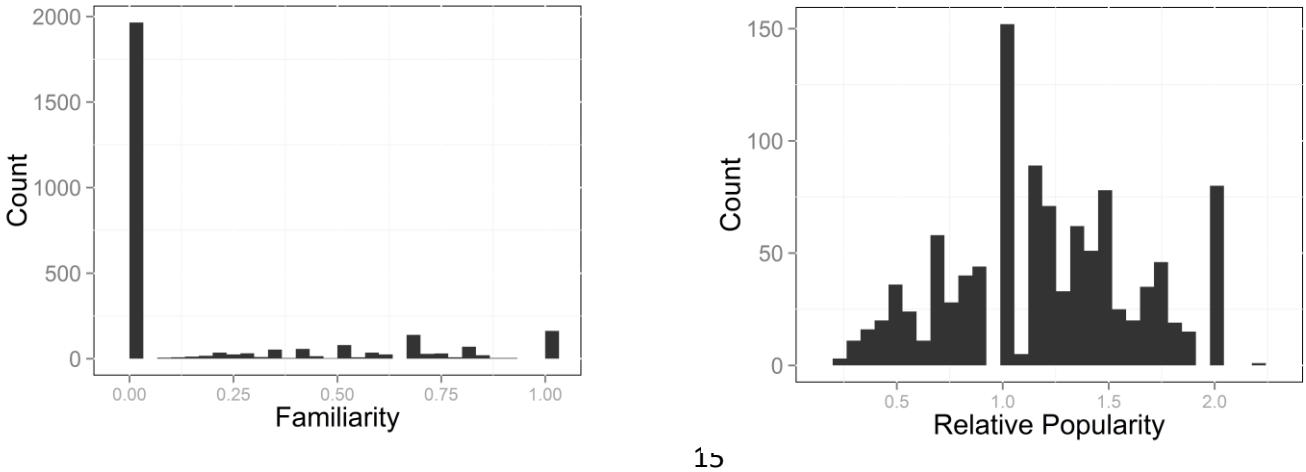
**Table 2. Example of Issue Distance Measure**

| | Issue | PvdA 1972 | DS'70 1972 | I.D. 1972 | PvdA 1977 | DS'70 1977 | I.D. 1977 | Δ I.D. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | *Economic Policy* | -9 | 3.4 | 12.4 | -10.1 | -3.4 | 6.7 | -5.7 |
| 2 | *Welfare policy* | 18.3 | 15.3 | 3 | 18.1 | 11.6 | 6.5 | 3.5 |
| 3 | *Europe* | 0.9 | 1.7 | 0.8 | 0.5 | 1.9 | 1.4 | 0.6 |
| 4 | *Multiculturalism* | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0.2 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.2 |
| 5 | *International issues* | 11.5 | 2.5 | 9 | 13 | 1.6 | 11.4 | 2.4 |
| 6 | *Special relations* | -0.4 | 1.7 | 2.1 | -0.6 | 0 | 0.6 | -1.5 |
| 7 | *Constitutional issues* | 0.1 | 0.8 | 0.7 | 0 | 0.4 | 0.4 | -0.3 |
| 8 | *(De)centralization* | 1.3 | 0.3 | 1 | 0.9 | 0 | 0.9 | -0.1 |
| 9 | *Traditional issues* | -1.8 | 0.3 | 2.1 | -0.4 | -1.9 | 1.5 | -0.6 |
| 10 | *Democracy* | 13.6 | 2 | 11.6 | 10.7 | 4.3 | 6.4 | -5.2 |
| 11 | *Treatment of groups* | 12.6 | 9.6 | 3 | 17.8 | 8.3 | 9.5 | 6.5 |
| 12 | *Government organization* | 3.7 | 9.3 | 5.6 | 1.9 | 7.5 | 5.6 | 0 |
| 13 | *Economic growth* | 4.9 | 10.4 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 9.4 | 3.9 | -1.6 |
| 14 | *Cultural issues* | 3.1 | 4.8 | 1.7 | 2.2 | 4.4 | 2.2 | 0.5 |
| 15 | *Law and order* | 0.4 | 0.9 | 0.5 | 0.4 | 2.3 | 1.9 | 1.4 |
| 16 | *Social harmony* | 0.1 | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0 | 0.8 | 0.8 | 0.6 |
| 17 | *Farmers' issues* | 0.3 | 1.4 | 1.1 | 1.7 | 2.1 | 0.4 | -0.7 |
| 18 | *Middle class issues* | 0.6 | 2.3 | 1.7 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.2 | -1.5 |
| 19 | *Environmental issues* | 9.2 | 5.6 | 3.6 | 6.1 | 9.2 | 3.1 | -0.5 |
| **Sum of Issue Difference** | | | | **65.6** | | | **63.6** | **-2** |

We use the Parlgov database (Döring & Manow, 2015) to determine the coalition composition (H1 and H2) and the party pair's familiarity (H3). This is operationalized as the number of times a party pair has been in the coalition together weighted by the number of occasions one of the two parties in the pair have been in government divided by two. If our familiarity variable has a value of 1, the party pair has only been in government together, and a value of 0 means that the party pair has never been in government together (see left part of Figure 3). We also use the Parlgov data set for the current number of seats and use the data sets of Jennings and Wlezien (2014), Askham-Christensen (2012) and van der Velden (2015) for the opinion polls. For our popularity variable, we first computed a party pair's popularity by

subtracting the number of seats a party pair currently holds in parliament by the mean of the polled seats it has six months prior to the election, that is around the time of the formulation of the election manifesto. In the second step, we ranked the parties based on the values of number of current seats minus polled seats; the higher the score, the more popular a party pair has become. Next, we added the rankings per party in a pair and divided its score by the number of possible dyads one of the parties is in. A higher value of popularity means that a party pair has become more popular compared to the other parties in the system, and a lower popularity score means that those dyads are the party dyads least favored by the electorate (see Figure 3). We take a measure indicating the reason for government termination (H5) from the Comparative Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive (Strøm, Muller, & Bergman, 2008). If a party pair is not in a coalition it should not be affected by how governments end their collaboration (value of 3). When a party pair is in government, the government is terminated because it is the end of the election cycle (value of 1), because of a conflict (value of 0), or because the cabinet called voluntary early elections (value of 3).

**Figure 3. Histograms of Familiarity and Popularity**



In our analyses, we control for economic indicators (GDP, unemployment, inflation), the ideological position of the party dyads, the number of parties in the coalition, and the effective number of parties within the system using the Comparative Political Data Set I (Armingeon, Knöpfel, Weisstanner, & Engler, 2014). To measure economic performance, we use GDP, the percentage of change in G growth rate one year before the election and the Misery Index (Okun, 1962), the percentage of change in unemployment rate one year before the election plus the percentage of change in inflation one year before the election. The ideological position of party dyads are measured using the CMP 'rile' measure (Klingemann et al., 2006; Volkens et al., 2014), giving the dyads a value of 0 when they are on the same ideological side and a value of 1 when the party dyads are on opposite sides (e.g. a left-wing and a right-wing party). The number of coalition parties are measured by the ParlGov dataset (Döring & Manow, 2015). The effective number of parties in the system is an index of the number of parties relative to the seats they gained at the election (Rae, 1968). Table 3 shows the descriptive information of the dependent and independent variables of this study.

**Table 3. Operationalization and Descriptive Statistics of Dependent and Independent Variables**

| DV | Operationalization | Mean (SD) | Min. – Max. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Issue Distance Change | Sum of changes on each issue between pair of parties | -2.34 (25.41) | -132.3 – 100.7 |
| **Categorical IVs** | | | |
| Cabinet pair | 0 not in government together, 1 in government | 0.12 (0.32) | 0 – 1 |
| Ideological position | 0 same side of left-right scale,1 opposite side | 0.44 (.50) | 0 – 1 |
| *Causes of Government Termination* | | | 0 – 3 |
| Conflict | 0 conflict | 0.02 (0.15) | |
| End of election term | 1 end of electoral term | 0.07 (0.25) | |
| Voluntary Elections | 2 voluntary early elections | 0.03 (0.17) | |
| Opposition pair | 3 no part of cabinet | 0.88 (0.32) | |

| **Continuous IVs** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Popularity | Relative popularity of party pair | 1.20 (0.44) | 0.22 – 2.20 |
| Familiarity | History of being in government together | 0.19 (0.32) | 0 - 1 |
| NCP | Number of coalition parties | 2.45 (1.39) | 0 – 5 |
| GDP | % change gdp growth | 2.79 (2.59) | -4.98 – 9.70 |
| Misery Index | % change inflation rate + % change unemployment rate | 11.01 (5.65) | 1.56 – 50.91 |
| ENPS | Effective number of parties | 77.77 (7.27) | 52.86 – 88.98 |

## Method of Estimation

To explain whether coalition formation influences parties' changes in issue distances, we are dealing with variation between a pair of party observations, across countries as well as over time. Hence, we have to estimate a model that deals with the interdependency between a pair of observations, the cross-sectional structure, i.e., panel differences based on countries and parties as well as time dependencies, i.e., issues relating to autocorrelation. To deal with the interdependency of party dyads and years, we use a simple party combinations nested in year panel setup. This model setup alone, however, does not solve all issues arising when using a panel data-estimation strategy. We have to account for heteroskedastic error terms, as it is very likely that the error terms have different variances between panels and are also correlated across different panels. Furthermore, it is likely that the observations of change in issue distance (our dependent variable) are correlated across time within panels. Consequently, we use a Prais-Winsten solution to address the panel-specific AR(1) error structure (Greene 1990, 473) to eliminate autocorrelation.[8]

[8] We do not use an AR(1) process with a lagged dependent variable, as recent studies indicate that a lagged dependent variable introduces biases associated with trending in the independent variables and the error term and washes out the effects of the main theoretical model (Achen 2000; Plumper, Troeger, and Manow 2005).

**Do coalition dynamics affect party platform change?**

Table 4 presents the results from our time-series cross-sectional regression analyses. Model 1 in Table 4 test H1a and H1b. The model shows that when parties where together in government, parties increase the distance to each other, which supports hypothesis 1b. The control variables show the following effect: a growth in GDP leads to a slight decrease in issue distance, while a growth in the Misery Index has the opposite effect. The effective number of parties (ENPS) has no effect on a party pair's issue distance. The more parties in government (NCP), party dyads increase their issue distance. Furthermore, the ideological position effect shows that if parties are on the opposite of the ideological left-right scale, they increase their issue distance.

Looking at the possible moderators (model 1, second row), the estimate of familiarity indicates that the more familiar party dyads are – i.e. the more time in office together – the smaller their issue distance (not significant). When familiarity is interacted with being a coalition pair (Figure 4), however, we see that familiarity is likely to decrease the issue distance for coalition dyads (second row of figure 4).

**Table 4. Main regression effects**[9]

| **Y: Δ Issue Distance** | **Model 1** | | **Model 2** | | **Model 3** | | **Model 4** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cabinet Party | 3.66* | (.54) | 6.57* | (1.04) | -2.44 | (3.21) | | |
| Familiarity | 0.37 | (.60) | 1.30* | (.46) | 0.59 | (.93) | 1.95* | (.99) |
| Popularity | | | | | -1.86* | (.51) | 39.84* | (9.57) |
| Cause of Termination (*ref. = Conflict*) | | | | | | | | |
| *End of Term* | | | | | | | 21.72* | (10.13) |

[9] Figure entries are Prais-Winsten regression coefficients corrected for panel-level heteroskedasticity and standard error. Due to data limitations country dummies could not be included, but we ran a fixed effect model which yielded the same results.

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Voluntary Early Election* | | | | | | | 39.17* | (11.86) |
| *Opposition* | | | | | | | 22.47* | (9.54) |
| Cabinet Party * Familiarity | | | -7.20* | (1.96) | | | | |
| Cabinet Party * Popularity | | | | | 3.64 | (3.92) | | |
| Popularity * Cause of Termination | | | | | | | | |
| *Popularity * End of Electoral Term* | | | | | | | -48.92* | (10.64) |
| *Popularity * Voluntary Early Election* | | | | | | | -54.77* | (11.66) |
| *Popularity * Opposition* | | | | | | | -41.70* | (9.59) |
| Misery Index | 0.27* | (.01) | 0.28* | (.01) | 1.05* | (.11) | 1.04* | (.10) |
| GDP | -0.17* | (.01) | -0.15* | (.03) | -0.12 | (.16) | -0.16* | (.17) |
| ENPS | -0.08* | (.01) | -0.08* | (.02) | 0.13* | (.04) | 0.23* | (.05) |
| Number of Cabinet Parties | 0.30* | (.11) | 0.28* | (.12) | 1.23* | (0.28) | 0.92* | (.31) |
| Ideological Position (*ref. = same side*) | 5.42* | (.02) | 5.45* | (.04) | 5.24* | (.42) | 4.89* | (.41) |
| Constant | -1.97 | (1.04) | -2.98* | (1.41) | -23.56* | (4.16) | -51.98* | (10.24) |
| N | 1789 | | 1789 | | 636 | | 635 | |
| Wald (df) | 75947.47* (7) | | 34780.50* (8) | | 408.46* (9) | | 344.02* (13) | |

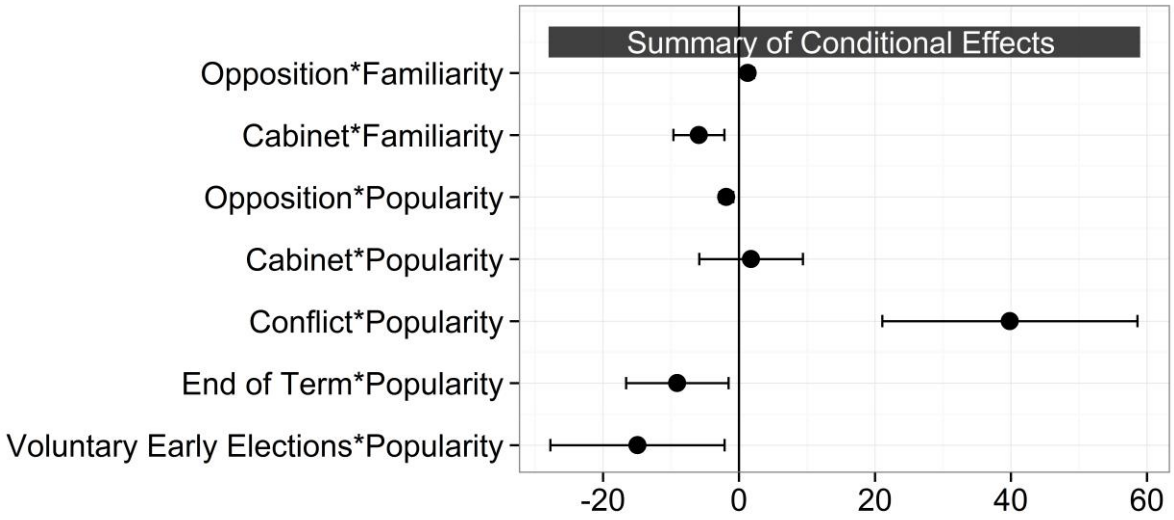
*Note:* Table entries are Prais-Winsten regression coefficients corrected for panel-level heteroskedasticity and standard errors.

* significant at the p < .05 level (two-tailed).

Model 3 shows the effect of the second moderator, popularity, on the change in issue distance of party dyads. The negative coefficient of popularity means that the more popular party dyads in opposition are, the more they decrease their issue distance. In Figure 4, we analyze whether this effect also holds for coalition party dyads. We do not find an effect for the moderation of popularity for government parties (no empirical support for the third hypothesis) as Figure 4 displays. We might explain this non-finding by the variation in which coalition governments end their term in office. When some termination causes have a positive effect on the effect of popularity on change in issue distance (increase of change in issue distance), others might have a negative effect (decrease of change in issue distance). If this is the case, these two effects cancel each other out (we test this in with H4).

Model 4 shows the effect of different termination causes. On average, party dyads in always increase their distance (the reference point is party dyads in a coalition government terminated due to conflict). However, the extent to which coalition party dyads increase their distance differ. When a coalition government terminates due to conflict, parties increase their issue distance much more than when they end office at the end of their legal term. This effect increases when coalition parties are popular (see Figure 4). This supports our fourth hypothesis.

**Figure 4. Summary of marginal effects in model 2-4**




**Robustness checks**

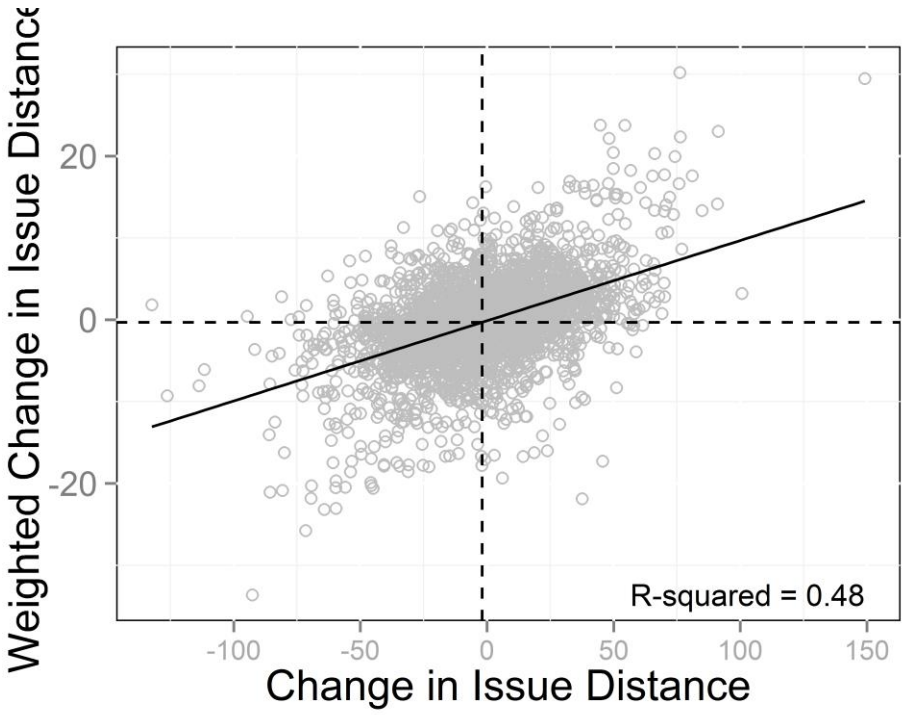
Some scholars have argued that small parties differ significantly from large parties in how they compete electorally (e.g. Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2006; Meguid, 2005). To account for the possibility that a party's vote share determines (to some extent) the distance of party dyads. We have vote-weighted our issue distance measure, calculated by the following :

$$\Delta\, Weighted\ Issue\ Distance =$$

$$\sum |P_{i,k,t} * V_{i,t} - P_{j,k,t} * V_{j,t}| - \sum |P_{i,k,t-1} * V_{i,t-1} - P_{j,k,t-1} * V_{j,t-1}|$$

We take the sum of the absolute distances between the position of party $i$ on issue $k$ at time $t$ ($P_{i,k,t}$) multiplied by the party's vote share at time $t$ ($V_{i,t}$) and the position of party $j$ on issue $k$ at time $t$ ($P_{j,k,t}$) multiplied by the party's vote share at time $t$ ($V_{j,t}$).[10] Similar to our unweighted dependent variable, we difference the measure. This measure is correlated with our unweighted measure (R-squared value of 0.48), as Figure 6 shows.

**Figure 6. Scatterplot of weighted and unweighted change in issue distance**




[10] Appendix D shows descriptive information of weighted change in issue distance.

Looking at the regression results, model 1 (Appendix E) shows that on average, party dyads in a coalition government decrease their issue distance. However, the effect is not statistically significant. The effects of the control variables are similar to the effects in the main analysis.Model 2 shows, in line with our main model, that when coalition partners have are familiar with each other (have shared office multiple times) they decrease their issue distance (support H2).

The conditional effect of popularity and termination cause are also similar to the effects with the unweighted change in issue distance. When party dyads are in government and popular, they are more likely to decrease their issue distance (support for H3). Also, if party dyads split up in coalition due to a conflict, they increase their issue distance (support for hypothesis 4).

Next to difference between small and large parties, parties' issue distance could be affected by critical events leading to public opinion shocks. Even though we control for time in our main analyses, we could also model time using a multilevel model, as issue changes of party dyads (level 1) are nested in election years (level 2) within countries (level 3).A variance component model showed that 24% of the variation is at the election years level. The multilevel model (Appendix F) also finds support for the H1b: party dyads in government increase their issue distance. Due to limited observations of the popularity variable, we were not able to validately replicate model 2-4.

**Discussion**

At the heart of the democratic system are political parties that compete to determine government policy (de Swaan, 1973). Parties propose a platform on which they campaign in elections and which they seek to realize once they are in the legislative and executive domain. Scholars of party behavior have primarily focused on how electoral incentives (i.e. gaining votes in order to obtain office) affect parties' platform changes (for an overview, see Adams, 2012). In this paper, we demonstrated that because the majority of parties compete in a system with coalition governments (Mitchell & Nyblade, 2008), coalition dynamics matter for parties' strategic decision to change their platform or stick to it.

In this study, we draw from two literatures: 1) the literature on coalitions, which analyzeshow and why coalitions are formed and the conditions under which coalitions survive or terminate, and less on party competition (Humphreys, 2008); and 2) the literature on party platform change which emphasizes the importance of parties' electoral performance, and pays less attention the extent to which parties respond to incentives to form coalition governments (Adams, 2012). We examined whether party platforms become more or less similar when parties shared office. Parties that are hardly able to calculate their optimal electoral strategy due to the complexity of multiparty coalition politics. Parties, therefore, rely on simple rules-of-thumb to determine their strategy: convergence to their current partner if they are likely to team up after fresh elections, but diverge otherwise. Specifically, we identified three cues that indicate whether the coalition works: familiarity, popularity, and coalition termination.

We examined our hypotheses with a dataset including 11 countries between 1950 and 2013 that allows for the relation between two parties. Our dependent variable, which we call

change of issue distance, consists of the change in the sum of the distances between every combination of 2 parties in the party system on 19 issues. The core theory of party platform change, the Downsian tradition, states that parties, in order to reap electoral benefits, need to be responsive towards voters and rival parties. Hence, relationships between parties are assumed and theoretically substantiated (Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009). However, to our knowledge, no studies in this field measure party platform change as a relation. We, therefore, contribute to the field by offering a new way of conceptualizing party platform change.

Our analyses demonstrated that on average coalition partners propose diverging platforms. This finding could mean that because of the 'give-and-take' game of coalition politics, parties might emphasize the policy issues in their manifestos that gives them more electoral benefits instead of defending joint government policy. Because voters care more about what is done to them than for them (Weaver, 1987) and voters perceive coalition parties are ideologically similar (Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013), dissociation from the current government policy could be the way to convince voters to select the party into future government. Furthermore, we show that when party dyads have shared office more frequently, parties are more likely to decrease their issue distance. Since all parties have policies they deeply care about (e.g. the Dutch progressive Liberals (D'66) care about expanding education spending), parties only want to make a bargain with a partner they know will honor the agreement in the future (Lindvall, 2010; Tommasi, Scartascini, & Stein, 2013). The more experience with a coalition partner, the more trust there is between the pair. When this trust is broken, due to a conflict that terminated the coalition, we showed that coalition partners increased their distance significantly.

Building on the idea that governments surf the popularity waves, we show that popular party dyads decrease their issue distance.. This finding could indicate that, in line with the coalition formation models (Axelrod, 1970; de Swaan, 1973), when coalition partners want to continue their cooperation, minimal ideological distance is important. If they do not want to team up with their coalition partner, because they terminated the coalition due to a conflict, parties diverge their platforms. To causally disentangle the underlying strategic considerations of coalition partners and its effect on their platforms, however, would be an interesting avenue for further research.

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## Appendix A

### Table A. Country Election Waves in the Data

| Country | Election Years | No. of Elections |
|---|---|---|
| *Austria* | 1962; 1966; 1970; 1971; 1975; 1979; 1983; 1986; 1990; 2002; 2006; 2008; | 12 |
| *Belgium* | 1961; 1965; 1968; 1971; 1974; 1977; 1978; 1981; 1985; 1987; 1991; 1995; 1999; 2003; 2007; 2010; | 16 |
| *Denmark* | 1960; 1964; 1966; 1968; 1971; 1973; 1975; 1977; 1979; 1981; 1984; 1987; 1988; 1990; 1994; 1998; 2001; 2005; 2007; 2011; | 20 |
| *Finland* | 1962; 1966; 1970; 1972; 1975; 1979; 1983; 1987; 1991; 1995; 1999; 2003; 2007; 2011 ; | 14 |
| *Germany* | 1961; 1965; 1969; 1972; 1976; 1980; 1983; 1987; 1990; 1994; 1998; 2002; 2005; 2009; 2013; | 15 |
| *Iceland* | 1963; 1967; 1971; 1974; 1978; 1979; 1983; 1987; 1991; 1995; 1999; 2003; 2007; 2009; | 14 |
| *Ireland* | 1961; 1965; 1969; 1973; 1977; 1981; 1982; 19821987; 1989; 1992; 1997; 2002; 2007; 2011; | 15 |
| *Luxembourg* | 1964; 1968; 1974; 1979; 1984; 1989; 1994; 1999; 2004; 2009; 2013 | 11 |
| *Netherlands* | 1963; 1967; 1971; 1972; 1977; 1981; 1982; 1986; 1989; 1994; 1998; 2002; 2003; 2006; 2010; | 15 |
| *Norway* | 1961; 1965; 1969; 1973; 1977; 1981; 1985; 1989; 1993; 1997; 2001; 2005; 2009; | 13 |
| *Sweden* | 1960; 1964; 1968; 1970; 1973; 1976; 1979; 1982; 1895; 1988; 1991; 1994; 1998; 2002; 2006; 2010; | 16 |

## Appendix B

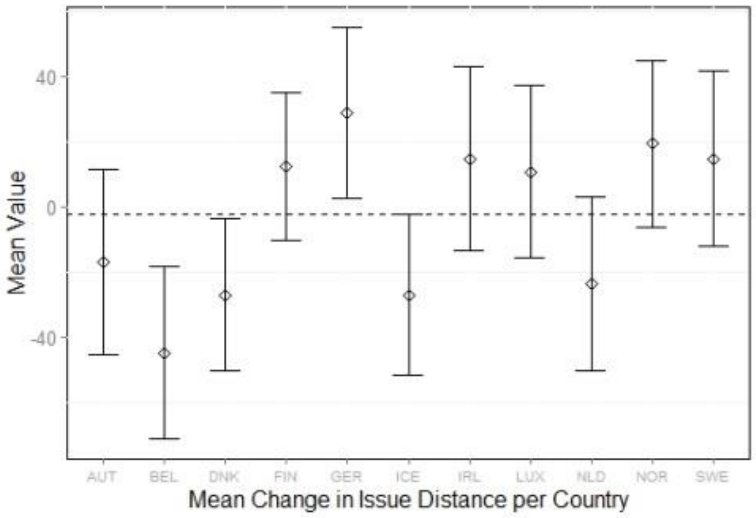
**Table B. Classification of CMP Issues** (Schumacher et al., 2015)

| Issue | CMP Variables | |
|---|---|---|
| Economic policy | (Free Market Economy + Incentives + Protectionism: Negative Regulation + Labor Groups: Negative + Economic Orthodoxy) – (Economic Planning + Corporatism + Protectionism: Positive + Keynesian Demand Management + Controlled Economy + Nationalization + Marxist Analysis + Labor Groups: Positive + Market Regulation) | (Per401 + per402 + per407 + per414 +per702 ) – (per404 + per405 + per406 + per409 + per412 + per413 + per415 + per701 + per403) |
| Welfare policy | (Welfare State Expansion + Education Expansion) – (Welfare State Limitation + Education Limitation) | (per504 + per506) – (per505 +per507) |
| Europe | EU: Positive – EU: Negative | Per108 – per110 |
| Multiculturalism | Multiculturalism: Positive – Multiculturalism: Negative | Per607 – per608 |
| International issues | (Anti-Imperialism + Military: Negative + Peace + Internationalism: Positive) –(Military: Positive + Internationalism: Negative) | (Per103+per105+per106+per107) – (per104+ per109) |
| Special relations | Foreign Special Relations: Positive – Foreign Special Relations: Negative | Per101 – per102 |
| Constitutional issues | Constitutionalism: Positive – Constitutionalism: Negative | Per203 – per204 |
| (De)centralization | Decentralization – Centralization | Per301 – per302 |
| Traditional issues | (National Way of Life: Positive + Traditional Morality: Positive) – (National Way of Life: Negative + Traditional Morality: Negative) | (per601 + per603) – (per602 + per604 ) |
| Democracy | Freedom and Human Rights + Democracy | Per201+ per202 |
| Treatment of groups | Equality + Underprivileged Minority Groups + Non-Economic Demographic Groups | Per503 + per705 + per706 |
| Government organization | Governmental and Administrative Efficiency + Political Corruption + Political Authority | Per303 + per304 + per305 |
| Economic growth | Economic Goals + Economic Growth: Positive + Technology and Infrastructure | Per408 + per411 + per416 |
| Cultural issues | Culture: Positive | Per502 |
| Law and order | Law and Order: Positive | Per605 |
| Social harmony | Social Harmony | Per606 |
| Farmers' issues | Agriculture and Farmers: Positive | Per703 |
| Middle class issues | Middle Class: Positive | Per704 |
| Environmental issues | Anti-Growth Economy: Positive + Environmental Protection | Per416 + per501 |

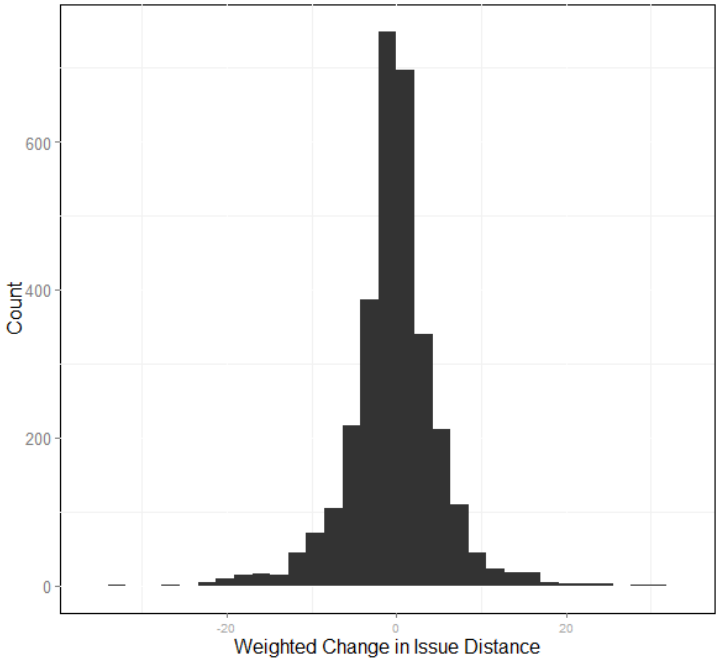
**Appendix C. Descriptive Information of Change in Issue Distance per Country**

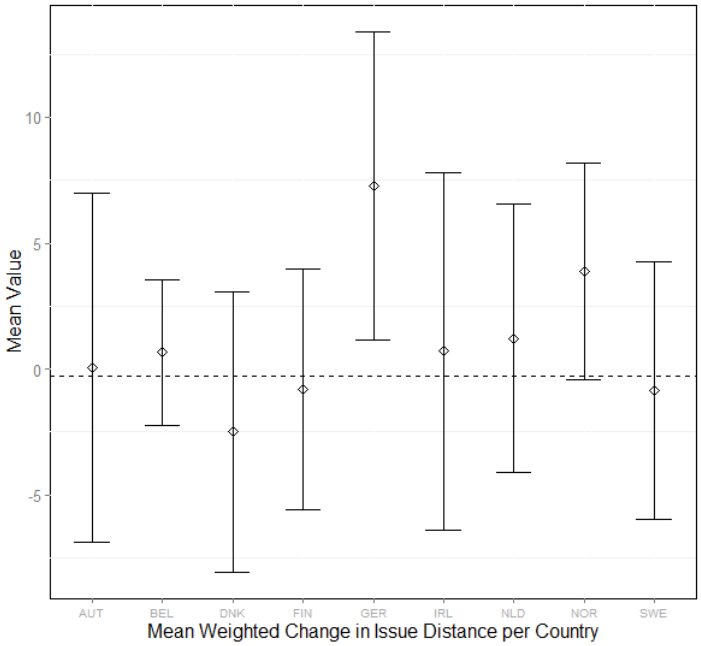
Figure 2 shows large variation in change in issue distance between countries (the dashed line presents the overall average). On average, in Germany parties the change in issue distance between parties is the largest, and Belgium the change in issue distance is the smallest.

**Figure 2. Mean Variation in Change of Issue Distance between Countries**



## Appendix D. Descriptive Information of Weighted Change in Issue Distance



## E. Regression results of weighted change in issue distance

| Y: Δ Weighted Issue Distance | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cabinet Party | -0.27 | (.15) | 0.32* | (.16) | 0.10 | (.53) | | |
| Familiarity | 0.09 | (.14) | 0.18 | (.16) | 0.30 | (.27) | 0.30 | (.17) |
| Popularity | | | | | 3.07* | (.17) | 8.29* | (2.83) |
| Cause of Termination (*ref. = Conflict*) | | | | | | | | |
| *End of Term* | | | | | | | 8.04* | (3.09) |
| *Voluntary Early Election* | | | | | | | 8.30* | (3.19) |
| *Opposition* | | | | | | | 6.63* | (3.07) |
| | | | | | | | | |
| Cabinet Party * Familiarity | | | -1.21* | (.32) | | | | |
| Cabinet Party * Popularity | | | | | -0.44* | (.53) | | |
| Popularity * Cause of Termination | | | | | | | | |
| *Popularity * End of Electoral Term* | | | | | | | -7.91* | (2.89) |
| *Popularity * Voluntary Early Election* | | | | | | | -7.58* | (2.92) |
| *Popularity * Opposition* | | | | | | | -6.12* | (2.83) |
| | | | | | | | | |
| Misery Index | 0.06* | (.02) | 0.01* | (.01) | 0.20* | (.02) | 0.19* | (.02) |
| GDP | -0.04* | (.01) | -0.03* | (.01) | 0.19* | (.05) | 0.17* | (.05) |
| ENPS | -0.04* | (.00) | -0.04* | (.00) | -0.01* | (.01) | -0.01 | (.01) |
| Number of Cabinet Parties | 0.34* | (.02) | 0.35* | (.02) | 0.72* | (.07) | 0.68* | (.07) |
| Ideological Position (*ref. = same side*) | 0.74* | (.05) | 0.75* | (.01) | 0.56* | (.06) | 0.59* | (.05) |
| | | | | | | | | |
| Constant | 1.13* | (.30) | 1.10* | (.27) | -7.14* | (1.06) | -13.53* | (3.22) |
| | | | | | | | | |
| N | 1789 | | 1789 | | 636 | | 635 | |
| Wald (df) | 1049.56* (7) | | 29100.64* (8) | | 935.52* (9) | | 1141.53* (13) | |

*Note:* Table entries are Prais-Winsten regression coefficients corrected for panel-level heteroskedasticity and standard errors.

* significant at the p < .05 level (two-tailed).

## F. Regression result of multilevel model

| **Y: Δ Issue Distance** | **Model 1** | |
|---|---|---|
| Cabinet Party | 6.00* | (1.85) |
| Familiarity | -0.10 | (1.97) |
| | | |
| Misery Index | 0.13 | (.19) |
| GDP | -0.20 | (.53) |
| ENPS | 0.10 | (.17) |
| Number of Cabinet Parties | -0.20 | (.98) |
| Ideological Position (*ref. = same side*) | 4.62* | (1.15) |
| | | |
| Constant | -13.22 | (13.03) |
| VPC Election Year | 0.23 | |
| VPC Party Dyad | 0.77 | |
| | | |
| N | 1833 | |
| Wald (df) | 27.77* | (7) |

*Note: Table entries random intercept models. Random slope models give similar results.*

* significant at the p < .05 level (two-tailed).